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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of whether society needs a more engaged university. "Engaged," in this context, means committed to serve the public interest, to promote the general welfare. The argument is constructed around three main points: (1) the 20th century university has traditionally sought to serve the public interest; (2) in recent years, largely exogenous forces have rendered its efforts to do so ironically counter productive; and (3) many of these forces and the institutional responses to them have shifted faculty, staff, and student orientations away from the public interest. The conclusion is drawn that society needs a less engaged educational institution, but a more engaged university community to recapture effectiveness in serving the public interest. (SLD)

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Higher Education and the Public Interest

Robin H. Farquhar

March 13, 2003

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HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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Salzburg Seminar, Austria
March 13, 2003

The key question in our program notes for this panel is: "Do we need a more engaged university?" In responding to this question, and endeavoring to be provocative as requested, I shall argue that we need a less engaged educational institution but a more engaged university community. I presume that what is meant by "engaged" in this context is: committed to serve the "public interest", which I interpret to mean promoting the general welfare – social, cultural, and economic – of the societies in which universities are embedded. I shall construct my argument around three main points: (1) the 20th Century university has traditionally sought to serve the public interest; (2) in recent years, largely exogenous forces have rendered its efforts to do so ironically counter-productive; and (3) many of these forces and institutional responses to them have shifted faculty, staff, and student orientations away from the public interest and toward individual benefit. My knowledge base for this analysis derives mainly from my forty-year career as a scholar and practitioner in the field of higher education policy and administration within the North American context, although that has been supplemented by considerable involvement with institutions in other parts of the world, particularly through the Salzburg Seminar's Universities Project (especially its Visiting Advisors Program).

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Traditional Services

Exemplified by the American land-grant concept, our 20th Century institutions of higher education traditionally sought to serve the public interest and they did so in countless ways, albeit with varying emphasis and success. For example:

– it is in the public interest to increase the number of citizens who are well educated and can enjoy fulfilling lives and productive careers – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to foster social mobility by enabling people through education to advance their status in society – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to generate knowledge so that our understanding of the world around us and our ability to solve problems that confront us can be improved – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to enhance the professional and technical capabilities of our experts so that their skills can raise our collective quality of life – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to expand the cultural, moral and behavioral sensibilities of our populace in aspiring to "the good society" – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to provide jobs for numerous employees who spend their salaries and pay their taxes to "grow" our economies – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to attract external grants for projects and programs, and paying audiences for games and performances, with the attendant positive impacts on our local economies – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to offer intellectual, cultural and recreational opportunities and entertainment for the citizens of our communities – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to present a source of qualified consultants who may be called upon to help solve challenges that require their expertise – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to preserve the cultural artifacts and literary traditions that represent the best of what people have produced and accomplished and that define who they are, where they've been, and what they aspire to achieve – universities have done that;

– it is in the public interest to make available opportunities to develop new competencies

and pursue new directions so people can extend their professional and personal options – universities have done that; and

– it is in the public interest to question the ideologies, priorities and policies of all who wield power over us, in the interests of accountability, transparency and fairness – universities have done that.

I could go on, but these dozen examples should be sufficient to support my first claim – that the 20th Century university has traditionally sought to serve the public interest.

Contemporary Institutions

In recent years, however, this commitment has been distorted by external forces that have steered our concern for engagement in directions that are less likely to serve the public interest because their principal motivation is necessarily toward institutional survival. These forces are primarily economically-driven (typically arising from reductions in the ability and willingness of governments to provide sustained funding support for our operations) and they are reflected in such contemporary responses as the following:

– financial cutbacks – in our provisions for human resources, facility maintenance, equipment modernization, library acquisitions, basic research, administrative systems, etc.; although undertaken in the interest of responsiveness to declining resources, such actions contribute to a decline in the quality of our efforts to serve the public interest in the various ways I outlined previously;

– accountability regimes – imposed by governments that have become increasingly concerned with controlling their costs and containing their burgeoning deficits and debts; they have been questioning the value gained from money spent on universities and have applied performance indicators to our activities for justification – but much of what we do in the public interest does not lend itself well to quantification and that which does is seldom central to our academic work, with the result that we must concentrate on peripheral measurable tasks to the neglect of fundamental qualitative efforts – and in this process of responding to public pressure, we run the risk of paralysis by analysis;

– program eliminations – in our efforts to be responsive by reducing costs and placing

priority on certain offerings that are least expensive and/or in greatest demand by economic planners; the result, however, can be the neglect of those fields of learning which are most crucial to the kind of high-quality liberal education that is best for the public interest;

– entrepreneurial initiatives – for the purpose of accessing new sources of revenue by providing university programs, products and services that are responsive to the needs of those who can pay for them; the problem with this otherwise commendable development is that our clients will pay only for what they want, and what they want can be inconsistent with both our academic values and the public interest;

– tuition fees – which are being introduced or increased in response to our need for additional income in order to fulfil our missions; but unless such charges are accompanied by generously funded and carefully crafted provisions for student aid, they can lead to extreme hardship for many families and discourage the financially disadvantaged from attending university – thereby reducing accessibility, hindering mobility and augmenting inequity, none of which is in the public interest;

– dysfunctional competition – for money, scholars and status, which is responsive to the rigors of a market economy and purportedly in the interest of quality improvement; this, however, discourages the kind of inter-institutional collaboration that is essential to the increasingly complex and sophisticated fields of study in which we should be engaged to serve the public interest;

– corporate management – whereby values and methods common in the private sector are transposed to the academic domain, in response to the mantra that universities should operate more like businesses if they are to be truly cost-effective; institutions of higher learning, however, cannot succeed without the kinds of freedom of thought and expression that, while essential to universities' service of the public interest, are often unwelcome in private enterprise;

technological fixation – in response to the popular view that information and communication technologies can solve many problem and make most things better; but in higher education such applications can become instrumental means that subvert academic ends, retarding the social and cultural development of our young people and obstructing the personal interaction between teachers and students, both of which are basic to the learning process that we should be pursuing in the public interest; and

– efficiency compulsion – as we strive to live responsibly within our limited budgets; yet, in constantly trying to do more with less by downsizing, restructuring, outsourcing and the like, we have cut corners, excised services and amputated programs to the extent that the quality of what we do has too often been reduced to a level that defies the public interest.

The irony of all this is that these responses are a product of our commitment to engagement. We

have done them because we wish to be responsive to the external demands that confront us and because we need to in order that we may survive as institutions that serve the public interest. But the nature of these responses is counterproductive in that, in certain ways which I have noted, they are inconsistent with the very public interest that they intend to address. We have become so myopically engaged that we have lost our scholarly objectivity, and therefrom arises my conclusion that we need a less engaged educational institution.

Individual Orientations

In part as a result of the forces and responses I have mentioned, those who comprise our internal communities – our faculty, staff, and students – have reoriented their behavioral patterns away from the public interest and toward their individual benefit. This shift in orientation can be illustrated for each of these constituencies.

– Faculty – For many members of our faculty, universities have become confusing places of late: their leaders stress the importance of teaching well, but their reward systems value research productivity; their mission statements trumpet academic freedom, but their equity policies promote "political correctness"; and professors' training prepared them for scholarly reflection, but their managers expect them to act entrepreneurially. In addition, they believe that what they do is critical to the advancement of humanity, but their level of remuneration indicates to them that it isn't. Consequently, because of their confusion, frustration and disappointment, they disengage from the university and its supposed devotion to the public interest. They become (perhaps understandably) selfish, seeking other opportunities to augment their incomes (I recognize that in some of our countries this is a basic necessity), their loyalty to their employing institutions and their missions dissipates, they grow reluctant to criticize those who wield power (especially over their revenue sources), they become overly litigious in protecting their personal welfare, they come to campus only when they must to meet a class (aided in this regard by tele-commuting technologies) and, ultimately, their work for the university becomes secondary to – and even gets in the way of – a variety of alternative personal and professional endeavors to which they choose to give priority.

– Staff – The non-academic employees of our universities (who comprise the largest

component of our labor forces in most cases) have seldom received the credit they deserve for enabling and facilitating the major operations in which we are engaged. What has kept them going is their professional integrity and their devotion to the grand cause in which we are involved together. They are committed to doing what their special skills enable them to do in support of the basic functions through which we seek to serve the public interest. But this commitment has been challenged of late by a confusion they share with their colleagues on faculty about the university's mission, by the increase in workload they experience as a result of their fellow-workers' jobs being eliminated due to downsizing, by their observation of faculty members who have clearly disengaged from the institution that employs them, and by the expectation that with the faculty's withdrawal they will be expected to fill the gaps (in program administration, student advising, policy interpretation, etc.) – gaps which they know they are neither qualified nor compensated to fill. As a consequence, I have noted in recent years an unprecedented incidence of work absences, stress leaves, labor unrest, and dismal morale on the part of our support staff. The inevitable result of these pathologies is a disengagement by support staff that cannot help but reduce our ability to serve the public interest.

– Students – When our youth discover that they must pay an increasing amount for their higher education, when they find themselves enrolled at an institution that seems overwhelmingly wedded to the values of a market economy, when they have difficulty in even finding a professor outside of the classroom, when they are forced to rely on unqualified support staff (no matter now diligent) to solve their academic problems, when their instructors are rewarded for work that distracts them from teaching, when those they depend on seem disengaged from the enterprise, when they can pass their courses by sitting at home alone in front of a computer, when the programs they would like to study are no longer available to them, when the curricula they're offered are rigid and dull, when they must use laboratory equipment and library holdings that are obsolete and inferior – it is no wonder that they, too, begin to doubt the commitment to a strong liberal education. University studies become a necessary-nuisance means to the all-important end of qualifying for a job. The contribution which a devoted and engaged student body can make to an institution's vitality in performing those functions that best serve the public interest is thereby lost. And our graduates leave this unhappy interlude with some work credentials rather than a higher education – having gained little understanding of what the public interest is, let alone how (or even why) they themselves might try to serve it.

The foregoing illustrations, relating to each of the three main constituencies within our universities, are offered in support of my contention that we need a more engaged university community.

To summarize, I have argued that the 20th Century university traditionally sought to serve

the public interest with examples of how it has done this, that in recent years largely exogenous forces have rendered our efforts to do so ironically counter-productive because of the institutional responses they have generated, and that many of these forces and responses have shifted faculty, staff and student orientations away from the public interest and toward individual benefit as illustrated for each constituency. From this analysis I have concluded that we now need a less engaged educational institution but a more engaged university community. These needs must be met if we are to recapture in the future our erstwhile effectiveness at serving the public interest. I hope that these brief comments have been sufficiently provocative.

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